

"Well, a trifle bigger than ever, and queer, but not a bad fellow. I never thought he was. You are a bitter little pill, Marjory!"

"And you are too soft, George. Still I am glad to feel you near me after these long months."

"Yes, it seems years since we were home!"

"More than a year," said Marjory. "You remember I was asked to spend the summer holidays at Marshlands? Oh! George, it was such a delightful time! Imagine a big farm, cows to milk, dear rough ponies to ride, and a boat on the Broad! Oh! and such cream and strawberries! Then at Christmas the little ones were threatened with chickenpox, and Mrs. Acland *couldn't* think of my running into danger!" a significant emphasis on the last words.

"So it is two years since I saw you. Well, you are going to stay now, and we'll try and make some fun," cried her brother.

"Try," she repeated, letting his arm go after pressing it closely for a minute, and walking to the fire—"try if you like." She stood gazing at the red coals, while her brother gazed at her, dimly perceiving the change which the last year had wrought.

She was slender to thinness, yet not angular; her quick slight gestures had a peculiar grace, partly the result of perfect proportion; her dark, red-brown wavy hair was turned carelessly back from her forehead, round which it grew thickly in a graceful distinct line; her bright, rapidly glancing eyes of doubtful colour; a scornful rosy mouth which could smile at times sweetly, and a clear though somewhat pale brunette complexion, did not suffice to convince all her schoolfellows that Marjory Acland was a pretty girl; some thought her just not plain, while others pronounced her nearly beautiful. This evening the cold air and the warm fire combined had given her a brilliant colour, which lit up her eyes and lent fairness to her complexion.

"Come, Marge, if you are not hungry, I am," cried George, drawing his chair to the table, on which tea and remains of a cold sirloin were set out.

"Here is a nice cake for you," said a stout red-faced woman, entering unceremoniously. "I baked it a' purpose for missee's home-coming, and glad I am to see her. Leave a bit for Mr. Cranston." So saying she went swiftly away.

"Cookie is a capital old woman! I can tell you, Monster and I would often have short commons but for her," cried George.

"One would think *both* of you were Mrs. Ackland's stepsons."

"Yes, especially Dick," returned George.

"Perhaps poor old Monster isn't her son really! Perhaps he has been changed when a baby by a wicked nurse, or a malignant witch, or Mrs. Acland herself, as we read in story-books," cried Marjory, laughing.

"Oh! he is her son right enough," said George. "He looks like her sometimes."